

An editorial I wrote for the Daily Texan, Austin, TX:

The war rages on. While Americans continue to engage in combat in Iraq, a conflict which reached an end over 30 years ago continues to steal headlines. John Kerry has made his Vietnam service a crucial part of his bid for the presidency, and yet another conservative attack on his criticism of the Vietnam war is slated to reach millions of Americans over public airwaves.

This time around, the Sinclair Broadcast Group, which owns or provides marketing services to 62 television stations nationwide (including operating KABB FOX29 and KRRT WB35 in San Antonio), is ordering its affiliates to pre-empt prime-time programming in order to air the documentary "Stolen Honor: Wounds That Never Heal" commercial-free sometime between Oct. 21 and Oct. 24.

The 45-minute film was produced by Carlton Sherwood and his independent film company, Red White & Blue Productions, and is tagged as "a documentary exposing John Kerry's record of betrayal." It includes interviews of Vietnam veterans who claim that Kerry's testimony before Congress in 1971 amounted to a confession for war crimes and extended their stay as prisoners of war. The film offers an interesting perspective on the presidential hopeful, but a completely one-sided perspective.

Before producing the documentary, the ex-Marine Sherwood worked under then-governor of Pennsylvania Tom Ridge and was also commissioned by the Bush administration to create www.firstresponder.gov, a web site to assist federal emergency planners.

Sinclair Broadcast Group - which came under fire in April for refusing to run an episode of Nightline in which Ted Koppel read the names of hundreds of Americans killed in Iraq - plans to run the documentary as a news piece and is thus not required to garner equal time for supporters of the senator. The company has claimed it is looking to bring Kerry on some sort of panel after the film but has yet to hear a response from the Democrat.

As a whole, the situation smells of a coordinated smear of John Kerry two weeks before the election. Considering the company owns and operates 21 networks broadcasting in swing states (including Florida, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Nevada, Missouri, Minnesota, Michigan, Virginia and Wisconsin), as well as the fact that the company donated 97 percent of its \$68,000 in political contributions to Republicans so far this year, few can justify the move beyond partisanship. The Democratic National Committee is asking the Federal Election Commission to investigate the matter, and 18 Democratic senators are filing a joint complaint to the Federal Communications Commission.

But this issue goes beyond party loyalties. When

media control becomes consolidated into the hands of too few (in this case, one company's ownership of 62 television stations), such results should not be surprising.

No media elite should hold that much sway over the networks, whether it's the right-wing Sinclair media elite or the oh-so-touted liberal media elite. The public airwaves are just that: public. Should a massive media conglomerate like Viacom force all 34 of its CBS and UPN stations to air Michael Moore's one-sided "Fahrenheit 9/11" in prime time over the next few weeks without equal response, airwaves would be equally abused by a corporation trying to further its political sway.

What is at issue is not the right to say what one wants in public domain. What is at issue is the manipulation by ownership to force a viewpoint onto an audience; in other words, masquerading partisan rhetoric as objective news coverage.

We hope Sinclair's political abuse of market control will shine new light on how the FCC has dropped the ball in recent years in regulating media consolidation, and hopefully the FEC will work with the FCC in staying true to the democratic ideals they are trusted to protect.